

**‘After Kant, Sellars, and Meillassoux: Back to Empirical Realism?’ (2018)**James R. O’Shea, *University College Dublin*

(This is the author’s post-peer reviewed version accepted for publication. For citations, please refer to the published version in: *The Legacy of Kant in Sellars and Meillassoux: Analytic and Continental Kantianism*, edited by Fabio Gironi, Routledge, pp. 21–40.  
ISBN-13: 978-1315203041. DOI: 10.4324/9781315203041)

**ABSTRACT:** I examine how Meillassoux’s conception of correlationism in *After Finitude*, as I understand it, relates firstly to Kant’s transcendental idealist philosophy, and secondly to the analytic Kantianism of Wilfrid Sellars. I argue that central to the views of both Kant and Sellars is what might be called, with an ambivalent nod to Meillassoux, an *objective correlationism*. What emerges in the end as the recommended upshot of these analyses is a naturalistic Kantianism that takes the form of an empirical realism in roughly Kant’s sense, but one that is happily wed with Sellars’ scientific realism, once the latter is disentangled from two implausible commitments that made such a reconciliation seem impossible to Sellars himself.

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1. At the outset of his 2008 talk on “Time Without Becoming,” Quentin Meillassoux describes his key concept of *correlationism*, a concept which he had expounded in his influential 2006 book, *Après la finitude*, published in English in 2008 as *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, in the following way. “I call ‘correlationism’ the contemporary opponent of any realism,” and he indicates that he particularly has in mind certain views shared by “transcendental philosophy, the varieties of phenomenology, and post-modernism”: namely, as he puts it, the idea “that there are no objects, no events, no laws, no beings which are not always already correlated with a point of view, with a subjective access” (Meillassoux 2014: 9). Transcendental (as opposed to post-modern) correlationism, in particular, is the view that “there are some universal forms of the subjective knowledge of things” (ibid. 10). “The *realist*, by contrast, maintains “that is possible to attain something like a reality in itself, existing absolutely independently of his viewpoint, or his categories, or his culture, or his language, etc.” (ibid. 9).

Meillassoux is here painting in very broad strokes, but in his more detailed realist arguments against “the basic argument of these ‘philosophies of access’” he has been concerned to stress “the exceptional strength of its antirealist argumentation” (ibid. 10). In what follows I examine how Meillassoux’s conception of correlationism in *After Finitude*, as I understand it, relates firstly to Kant’s transcendental idealist philosophy, and secondly to the analytic Kantianism of Wilfrid Sellars. I argue that central to the views of both Kant and Sellars is what might be called, with an ambivalent nod to Meillassoux, an *objective correlationism*. What emerges in the end as the recommended upshot of these analyses is a naturalistic Kantianism that takes the form of an empirical realism in roughly Kant’s sense, but one that is happily wed with Sellars’ scientific realism, once the latter is disentangled from two implausible commitments that made such a reconciliation seem impossible to Sellars himself.

2. I want to begin by asking whether Kant's empirical realism should be taken to be a "correlationist" view in Meillassoux's sense? The empirically real objects of possible experience, on Kant's view, are (in the case of "outer sense") causally interacting material objects that persist independently of our perspectival encounters with them. But of course Kant's empirical realism is inseparable from his "transcendental idealism": such objects are necessarily the objects of certain a priori forms of sensible and conceptual representation, namely, space and time and the categories respectively. Meillassoux's conception of "transcendental correlationism" is clearly intended to include this primary sense in which the empirically real, mind-independent material objects of possible experience, for Kant, are "always already correlated with" or correlative to certain a priori forms of representation "in us," as Kant is wont to put it. While this certainly seems appropriate in general, everything hangs on just how one understands these elusive but fundamental Kantian conceptions, and in particular what sort of mind-dependence of the objects of experience or "phenomena" is thought to be entailed by Kant's transcendental philosophy.

At the outset of *After Finitude* Meillassoux presents these issues vividly in terms of what he calls "ancestral" realities, an example of which would be what he dubs an "arche-fossil": "I will call 'ancestral' any reality anterior to the emergence of the human species," and an arche-fossil or "fossil-matter" are materials such as the radioactive decay of isotopes that indicate the existence of an ancestral reality or event (Meillassoux 2008: 10). In relation to correlationism, Meillassoux then formulates the philosophical "problem of ancestrality" in terms of the question, "*how are we to conceive of the empirical sciences' capacity to yield knowledge of the ancestral realm?*", and thus in terms of "the nature of scientific discourse":

how is mathematical discourse able to describe a world where humanity is absent; a world crammed with things and events that are not the correlates of any manifestation; a world that is not the correlate of a relation to the world? This is the enigma .... (Meillassoux 2008: 26)

Meillassoux proceeds to argue that the very formulation of this question, "what is the condition that legitimates science's ancestral statements?" has as "its primary condition ... the relinquishing of transcendentalism" (ibid. 27). Given that I will follow Meillassoux in rejecting "speculative" versions of correlationism, and will agree that, as I shall consider it, "correlationism is not a metaphysics: it does not hypostatize the correlation" in terms of any "ancestral Witness" taken to ground the ancestral (e.g., God, Absolute Mind, the Kantian Ego incorrectly interpreted, et al.), our primary concern becomes whether Meillassoux is right that the problem of the ancestral entails the rejection of transcendental correlationism of the Kantian varieties, however sophisticated (cf. the two transcendental "correlationist rejoinders" that Meillassoux considers and rejects at 2008: 18–26).

3. The first transcendentalist rejoinder that Meillassoux considers involves the familiar attempt to account for the existence of unperceived or unwitnessed ancestral events by introducing "a counterfactual such as the following: *had there been a witness*, then this occurrence would have been perceived in such and such a fashion" (2008: 19). In apparent support of this interpretive move Meillassoux might well have quoted Kant's example in the *Critique of Pure Reason* about the existence of unwitnessed inhabitants of the moon that we *could* experience:

Accordingly, the objects of experience are never given [as things] in themselves, but only in experience, and they do not exist at all outside it. That there could be inhabitants of the

moon, even though no human being has ever perceived them, must of course be admitted; but this means only that in the possible progress of experience we could encounter them; for everything is actual that stands in one context with a perception in accordance with the laws of the empirical progression. Thus they are real when they stand in an empirical connection with my real consciousness, although they are not therefore real [as things] in themselves, i.e., outside this progress of experience. (A492–3/B521; interpolations added)<sup>1</sup>

Meillassoux's reply to this first transcendentalist rejoinder, however, indicates that he is understanding Kant's empirical realism and transcendental idealism in ways that I think we ought to reject (cf. O'Shea 2012, 2016).

Meillassoux reconstructs the transcendentalist rejoinder as making the phenomenological point that what is already actually given in experience is always given against the background of aspects or regions that are *not* entirely given all at once in the experience, but which can or could be given by "adumbrations" (Husserl's *Abschattung*) from what is actually given in the experience. On behalf of the rejoinder Meillassoux cites, for example, the existence of the unperceived backside of a perceived cube (2008: 19). Meillassoux responds, however, that this trivial account of the existence of unperceived objects or events in terms of our capacity to fill in further unwitnessed "lacunae" as implicitly present in what is already actually given (cf. 2008: 20, on the idea of "a lacunary givenness") – this correlationist construction of mere unwitnessed lacunae in "an event occurring when *there is already* givenness" – does not touch the deeper problem of the ancestral, which "designates an event ... *anterior to givenness itself*," and which thus refers to "occurrences which are not contemporaneous with any givenness, whether lacunary or not" (ibid.):

More acutely, the problem consists in understanding how science is able to think – without any particular difficulty – the coming into being of consciousness and its spatio-temporal forms of givenness in the midst of a space and time which are supposed to pre-exist the latter. ...[S]cience thinks a time in which the passage from the non-being of givenness to its being has effectively occurred – hence *a time which, by definition, cannot be reduced to any givenness which preceded it and whose emergence it allows*. (Meillassoux 2008: 21)

Once we properly recognize that what is "at issue here is not the time of consciousness but the time of science" (ibid.), then according to Meillassoux we can see that "every variety of correlationism" is exposed as an extreme idealism" (2008: 18), whether Berkeley's or Kant's, by the problem of ancestral realities that exist prior to "the coming into being of consciousness and its spatio-temporal forms of givenness" (2008: 21).

It should be clear from these passages, however, that at least as far as his response to this first rejoinder is concerned (and we shall see that the second rejoinder does not alter the essential issues at stake), Meillassoux understands the correlationism involved in Kant's empirical realism *cum* transcendental idealism in a way that restricts its claims to the domain of lacunae-filling constructions from some real historical or hypothetically imagined witnessings involved in some actually given conscious experience. Then it will of course be impossible to make sense, for example, of Kant's own pre-Critical nebular hypothesis concerning the origin of our solar system *within* a single spatiotemporal-causal material framework that pre-existed the emergence of any human consciousness. But even internal to the first *Critique* this is not, in my view, the correct way to understand Kant's "formal idealism," as he also calls it (B518–519*n*).

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<sup>1</sup> References to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, will be to the standard 'A' and 'B' paginations of the first (1781) and second (1787) editions respectively, using the translation by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Kant argues that any finite, temporally discursive cognition of a world requires or (as we might put it in this context) “correlates” *objectively* with certain a priori forms of conceptual and sensory representation in general. As such Kant’s empirical realism is not based on gap-filling constructions from some actually given experiences, whether real or imagined, contra Meillassoux. Meillassoux takes it to be an anti-Kantian point to suggest that, as science indicates, “givenness could just as well *never* have emerged if life had not arisen” (2008: 22). But Kant’s transcendental deduction, for example, concerns the lawful and structural forms, described functionally at the most abstract, second-order level, that must be true of any objective world that is to be the object of experience for *any* sensibly receptive yet potentially self-aware experiencer of that world; and these categorial forms of unity are then argued to be applicable, a fortiori, to our human spatiotemporal form of experience in particular. Kant does not start with particular, partial sensory experiences and then seek to account for our construction of a world of objects to fill the lacunae in those states of consciousness (whether real or hypothetical). Rather, he argues that the concept of *any* finite subject’s being aware of a plurality of sensible states at all in the first place, and in particular being aware of it *as* such a plurality, entails that such a subject’s world is already validly conceived by that subject as a directly perceived, empirically mind-independent, objective world of persisting physical realities in general, all of which, whether scientifically conceived or otherwise, must exist within a single, potentially infinitely extensive and divisible spatiotemporal universe. As I will put it, Kant’s correlationism is an *objective correlationism* in this highly abstract and formal sense, a sense which contrasts sharply with the historically conditioned and restricted *subjective correlationism* that one finds in Meillassoux’s descriptions of transcendental correlationism in the passages examined above.

4. This point can be further clarified and in fact reinforced by considering Meillassoux’s formulation of and response to the “second correlationist rejoinder from a transcendental perspective.” This second Kantian rejoinder claims that Meillassoux’s arguments concerning ancestral realities involve “an elementary confusion between the empirical and the transcendental levels of the problem under consideration” (2008: 22). But as with the first rejoinder, everything depends on how these distinctions are spelled out – in this case, the transcendental/empirical distinction. Meillassoux portrays the Kantian as responding this way:

You [Meillassoux] proceed as though the transcendental subject – which is ultimately the subject of science – was of the same nature as the physical organ which supports it – you collapse the distinction between the conscious organ which arose within nature and the subject of science which constructs the knowledge of nature. But the difference between these two is that the conscious organ *exists*; it is an entity in the same sense as any other physical organ; whereas the transcendental subject *simply cannot be said to exist*; which is to say that the subject is not an entity, but rather a set of *conditions* rendering objective scientific knowledge of entities possible. But a condition for objective cognition cannot be treated as an object, and since only objects can be said to exist, it is necessary to insist that a condition does not exist – precisely because it conditions. (Meillassoux 2008: 22–23).

In response to the Kantian’s “play[ing] with the notion of condition in this way,” Meillassoux argues that despite the above distinction between objects, which exist, and a transcendental condition, which (Meillassoux’s Kantian says) “simply does not exist,” in the end “one still has to say that *there is* a transcendental subject, rather than no subject,” and “that such a subject *takes place*” (Meillassoux 2008: 24). While following Kant in avoiding all speculative dogmatism, we must still grant that such a transcendental subject “takes place” in the sense of being “posited as a *point of view* on the world, and hence as taking *place* at the heart of the world,” as a “position *in* the

world” (ibid. 24–25). Hence, as necessarily “localized among the finite objects” in this way, the transcendental subject “*remains indissociable from its incarnation in a body*” (ibid.); and therefore all of Meillassoux’s earlier objections to Kantianism based on ancestral realities that exist entirely independently of the emergence of any such perspectival givenness remain sound, he contends.

It is crucial to see exactly why and how Meillassoux’s understanding of these central Kantian distinctions is mistaken, in my view. Meillassoux is certainly right about this important point: “Granted, the transcendental is the condition for knowledge of bodies, but it is necessary to add that the body is also the condition for the taking place of the transcendental” (2008: 25). But his argument involves the following fallacious inference: (i) [This is true:] Kant’s transcendental subject requires a perspectival, spatiotemporal embodiment, as “a necessary condition”; therefore (ii) [This is false:] Kant’s “correlationist” arguments concerning the necessary forms of any potentially self-conscious, finite cognition, are arguments that depend essentially on premises concerning (or concepts pertaining to) the emergence – the “instantiation” or “appearance” in space and time – of such embodied subjects; for example, on facts such as “the emergence of living bodies; that is to say, *the emergence of the conditions for the taking place of the transcendental*” (2008: 25). The subtle mistake that I think is involved here can perhaps be brought out as follows.

Kant’s formal, transcendental method – his “objective correlationism,” as I have called it – involves a series of attempts to demonstrate that there are various nested necessary connections between concepts considered at various levels of abstraction from our fully embodied, spatiotemporal, empirically rich and historical experience. For example, consider the progression of arguments across the two halves of the second edition Transcendental Deduction (the first half abstracting from our human, spatiotemporal form of sensibility, the second half reintroducing it); through the Schematism, the Analogies, and the Refutation of Idealism, to the empirically regulative yet nonetheless a priori transcendental principles of reason (in the Appendix to the Dialectic) and of reflective judgment (in the third *Critique*, etc.), and including the highest-level but material instantiations of the Analogies and other transcendental principles in Kant’s *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (matter-as-the-movable-in-space-subject-to-attractive-and-repulsive-forces), and so on. Each of the later stages of argument involves further, more specific, and eventually (indeterminately specified) empirical (including bodily) necessary conditions for the satisfaction of the earlier, more abstract demonstrated connections to be possible.

For instance, the Deduction’s attempted necessary conceptual connection between the possibility of the ‘I think’ being able to accompany all of my representations, and those representations being of an *object* that exists independently of my representings, is an argument that does not depend on, for instance, the further argumentation in the Refutation and then the regulative maxims and beyond concerning various additional necessary conditions on such a potentially self-aware experience, each necessary for the preceding: for example, that such a cognition must be of independent objects *in time*; in fact, *in a determinate time-order*; that it be of objects that are also *in space*; in fact, that it be of spatial objects that are *directly (rather than indirectly) perceived* as such (the Refutation); that it be of *empirical objects that instantiate attractive and repulsive forces* (the *Metaphysical Foundations*), and which are *to some (a priori unspecifiable) degree empirically systematic as to their empirical kinds and empirical causal laws* (the regulative maxims), which are necessary if there are to be any causal connections and hence any universal principle whatsoever, which is itself necessary if there is to be any ‘I think’ in the first place. The same progression from the most abstract conceptual connections to successively more specific (and eventually, though indeterminately so) embodied, historical, and empirical necessary conditions, is observable in Kant’s practical philosophy, too, and is the key to understanding it as something other than an empty, abstract formalism: from the *Groundwork* and the second *Critique* through to the later, more

specific *Metaphysics of Morals* (the doctrines of justice and virtue), and including the regulative maxims and ideas of reason that are involved in Kant's principles concerning politics and history.

The deep mistake is to hold that the highly abstract conceptual connections that are demonstrated at one level (say, in the 'Transcendental Deduction') depend on particular instantiations of the necessary (and eventually, empirical) conditions that are demonstrated also to be necessary with the assumption of further, more specific conditions (such as *motion*, etc.). Kant's objective correlationism in my view plausibly seeks to demonstrate, for example, that any finite, sensibly receptive yet self-aware cognition must be directly of a world of objects in general conceived to persist independently of those perceptions. The soundness of *that* argument does not depend on the sorts of bodily "taking place" that, with further assumptions and argumentation, Kant also contends are necessary conditions for that kind of cognition to be possible for beings like us. And even in the latter case, i.e. in the case of the more specific necessary conditions, the objectively correlationist transcendental principles do not depend for their validity on the particular *de re* instantiation of those principles, in whatever specific manner they are or may be instantiated. Furthermore, nothing in Kant's method requires holding that such a priori transcendental conditions "do not exist," as we saw Meillassoux put it on behalf of the Kantian. The argument, rather, is that if any such finite (etc.) knower exists, then the series of more and less abstract nested necessary conditions must be satisfied, though in a manner that, at the empirical level, is *not* determinately specifiable merely a priori, but only indeterminately according to regulative maxims of reason or reflective judgment. Nor does this method of transcendental abstraction from the empirical involve an unwitting metaphysical *reification* of the relevant non-empirical conceptual connections in such a way as "to eternalize the correlation" (2008: 122).<sup>2</sup> Ancestral realities and the "paradox of the arche-fossil" (2008: 26) do not in the end undermine Kant's objective transcendental (or formal) correlationism so understood,<sup>3</sup> though the objection does require that Kant's formal idealism and his transcendental/empirical and regulative/constitutive distinctions be understood as above – which fortunately, I believe, is the right way to understand them.

5. Although I will not explore the matter in detail here, I believe that the above considerations can also help to clarify the equally interesting and complex issues raised by Meillassoux in Chapter 4 of *After Finitude*, entitled "Hume's Problem." Meillassoux seeks to defend a "speculative materialism" (2008: 121) that, among other things, pushes further than Hume himself Hume's famous sceptical argument concerning our alleged "capacity to demonstrate the necessity of the causal connection," that is "to demonstrate that the same effects will follow from the same causes

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<sup>2</sup> For a treatment of Kant's transcendental conception of self, concept, and object in relation to these topics that is, in my view, more insightful than Meillassoux's, but which is also deeply informed by the latter's work, see Brassier 2008 and 2011. More generally, Brassier's continuing work on Sellars' philosophy, including his contribution to this volume, has seen him depart from central aspects of Meillassoux's work and move more in the direction of Sellars' scientific realism, in ways that also highlight aspects of Kant's transcendental philosophy that are preserved, albeit in transformed shape, in Sellars' scientific naturalism. See also recent work by Fabio Gironi (most recently, Gironi 2017, and this volume) for further constructive attempts to trace a path bridging recent developments in continental realism and analytic Kantianism, with a focus on the key role of Sellars. Hariri's contribution to this volume is another instance of a similarly constructive bridging of these traditions.

<sup>3</sup> Ray Brassier's 2007 book, *Nibil Unbound* is well worth exploring by anyone interested in Meillassoux's arguments in *After Finitude* and their wider intellectual setting, though his treatments there should be seen in the light of Brassier's more recent work mentioned in the previous note.

*ceteris paribus*” (2008: 85; cf. 90 for the respect in which Meillassoux goes further than Hume). Meillassoux takes Kant’s transcendental correlationist response to Hume to lie in his attempt to show that “causal necessity is a necessary condition for the existence of consciousness and the world it experiences,” for the reason that the assumption of a chaotic or contingent world without the necessity of physical laws would render impossible any conscious representation of a world at all. So that “*if* consciousness exists,” then “the hypothesis of the contingency of the laws of nature [is] refuted by the mere *fact* of representation,” according to Meillassoux’s Kant, and we can conclude that “there is a causality that necessarily governs phenomena” (Meillassoux 2008: 89). Against this Meillassoux attempts to expose “a logical fallacy inherent in the transcendental deduction” by showing, “contrary to what the latter maintains, that the constancy of the phenomenal world does not amount to a refutation of the contingency [or non-necessity] of physical laws” (2008: 93). Rather, Meillassoux goes on to argue, it is possible to account for such phenomenal constancy and the stability of its empirical laws in terms of “the purely intelligible chaos that underlies every aspect of it” (ibid. 83).

Meillassoux develops this wider argument in considerable detail, raising many important issues, but for present purposes I will continue to focus specifically on certain aspects of his critique of Kant’s correlationist response to “Hume’s Problem.” We should, I believe, distinguish three different aspects of Kant’s views on causal necessity (cf. O’Shea 1997, and 2012: Ch. 5):

- (1) First, there is the transcendental necessity – an “objectively correlational” conceptual necessity, as we described it earlier with an ambivalent nod to Meillassoux – of the Second Analogy’s general causal principle. This principle holds that, necessarily (= transcendental), for any given alteration (call it B), there exists *some* prior alteration or other (call it X), such that alterations of X’s type produce (i.e., causally, physically necessitate) alterations of B’s type.
- (2) Second, there will be whatever particular empirical causal law is discovered or hypothesized to fulfil that transcendental-correlational requirement in any particular case: for example, we might hypothesize that it is A-type events (say, the heat of the sun) that produce B-type events (the melting of wax; cf. A764–6/B792–4).
- (3) Third, using Kant’s terms, there is the “problematic,” and traditionally “dogmatic” principle of reason, which demands that there be some logically sufficient reason or condition or explanation for any given conditioned empirical reality such that the totality of empirical conditions ultimately is thought, by a “transcendental illusion,” to require for its logically sufficient explanation either an “unconditioned condition” (for example, God), or a knowably *complete* totality of conditions (A305–9/B362–6; A783–4/B811–12).

Kant’s conclusion in the Dialectic, including its crucial Appendix on the regulative maxims and ideas of reason, is that the traditional principle of sufficient reason must be understood *critically* as limited (in this case) to the Second Analogy’s principle (1) above, as formally constitutive of the possibility experience in general. However, (1) in turn entails (2): that is, that there must exist *some empirical causal laws or other* to be discovered (this is necessary for the possibility of satisfying the transcendental principle in (1)). And furthermore, while (3)’s principle of sufficient reason is demonstrably illusory when considered “dogmatically” as a constitutive principle, Kant argues that the possibility of fulfilling (2)’s requirement in turn (and hence satisfying (1)) does require an indeterminately *regulative use of reason* according to the maxims of which there must exist, in any knowable nature, *some degree and manner or other* of empirical uniformity and systematicity. The latter

empirical lawfulness, however, has to be discovered empirically as far as both its nature and its degree of empirical uniformity or systematicity are concerned.

If one reads Meillassoux's critique of Kant on "the necessity of physical laws" in his chapter on "Hume's Problem" with Kant's three carefully distinguished aspects of necessity in mind, and with the resulting interrelated transcendental/empirical and dogmatic/regulative/constitutive distinctions clearly in view, I think his striking critique of Kant's formal correlationism becomes highly ambiguous and problematic. It should be kept in mind, for example, that for Kant all of the particular physical laws discovered in the natural sciences are contingent and defeasible rather than necessary.<sup>4</sup> Of course, each empirical causal law involves physical necessitation as per (2) above – i.e., given that empirical kind of alteration A occurs, then kind B necessarily follows – that is, *if* we've got the right empirical causal law to cover the empirical case at hand, which is a contingent matter of ongoing inquiry. That is one kind of relative necessity, along with one kind of empirical contingency, that is involved in Kant's conception of physical laws. Another (conceptually) relative necessity pertains to (1), i.e. Kant's formal, objective correlationism proper: that is, *if* any experience of a world is to be possible for any finite (etc.) knower at all, then principle (1) must obtain in that world, and (1) requires that (2) is empirically realized in some way or other (to be discovered); while (2) in turn requires the a priori indeterminate but nonetheless transcendently necessary regulative assumptions articulated by the "maxims" of reason and (in the third *Critique*) reflective judgment that are involved in (3). *But what kind and what degree of "stable" uniformity and empirical systematicity the world actually possesses* is for Kant not something that can be legislated by us a priori, but rather is to be discovered through ongoing inquiry into nature's secrets.

It is importantly true, as Kant argues in relation to (3) in the first *Critique*'s Appendix to the Dialectic, that the chaotic supposition of *no degree of empirical uniformity at all* (hypothetically assuming that this made sense) would render the application of any general concepts impossible (2), and hence would render the instantiation of (1)'s properly correlationist principle impossible as well (cf. A653–4/B681–2). But for Kant, *that* a priori regulative requirement of reason, i.e. that there exist in any knowable nature in general *some* degree of empirical uniformity and systematicity or other (i.e., (3)), is consistent with the discovery of all manner of relative stability and instability in nature's actual empirical laws, our conceptions of which of course change as a result of inquiry, on Kant's view. Any attempt to prove a priori – as Meillassoux suggests is in fact the case in relation to the supposed implicit reasoning that he thinks lies behind Kant's alleged "necessitarian inference" (cf. 2008: 93–98) – that phenomenal nature's physical laws must have a *deeper* necessity or non-contingency, one that is putatively derivable by reason from a consideration of "all those possibilities that are conceivable (non-contradictory)" in relation to "all those possibilities that are actually *experienced*" (2008: 95), would manifestly be regarded by Kant as a *dogmatic* use of reason. Such a use would violate the strictures on reason involved in (3), as well as being motivated largely by underplaying or missing out the contingency that is already involved in both (2) and (3), for Kant, not to mention the merely relative formal necessity that is involved in (1) (as discussed in relation to the "first rejoinder" in the previous section above).

All of the above points should make it clear why I think we should not be happy with Meillassoux's portrayal of what is involved, or what is implicit, in Kant's formal correlationist

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<sup>4</sup> Of course there is an important dimension of relative a priori derivability involved in Kant's metaphysics of natural science, particularly in relation to Newton's discovered laws: see Friedman 1992 and his later writings for a start on this complex topic; and cf. O'Shea 1997 (and work currently in progress) for my take on the aspects of a priori derivability and empirical inquiry that I take to be involved in Kant's philosophy of nature as a whole.



response to Hume's Problem. This can be illustrated by the following passage, for example (but see also 2008: 105–8 for confusions, from my perspective, resulting from not distinguishing or from misconceiving Kant's (1), (2), and (3) above):

To sum up: the Humean-Kantian inference is an instance of probabilistic reasoning<sup>5</sup> applied not to an event in our universe, but rather to our universe itself considered as merely one among a totality of possible universes. ... [I]f physical laws *could actually change for no reason*, it would be extraordinarily improbable if they did not change ... so frequently ... that we would never have been here to notice it in the first place, since the ensuing chaos would have precluded the minimal degree of order and continuity required for the correlation between consciousness and world. Thus, necessity is proven by a fact of immensely improbable stability, viz., the permanence of the laws of nature, and by the subjective obverse of this permanence, which is the consciousness of a subject capable of science. Such is the logic of the necessitarian argument, and more particularly, of the frequentalist implication that underlies it. (Meillassoux 2008: 98)

For as we have seen, for Kant the “minimal degree of order and continuity” required to satisfy (2) and thereby (1) is only indeterminately specified as to its nature and degree by reason's regulative maxims (i.e., in (3)), and is in no way further specifiable merely a priori. The argument put forward in the passage above involves what Kant would regard as a “dogmatic” use of reason. Further, the actual physical laws of nature, whatever they turn out to be, are contingent relative to the a priori “correlational” necessity in (1), which is itself a relative formal necessity rather than a claim involving its own “taking place”. Again, the so-called “permanence” of the laws of nature referred to in the passage is merely formal if it pertains to (1), and false when considered in relation to the empirical dimensions in (2) and (3) if this “permanence” is taken to imply (as seems to be the case in Meillassoux's argument) that Kant insists on the non-contingency of the actual “manifest” physical laws of phenomenal nature. To the contrary, on Kant's view the particular empirical physical laws that turn out to satisfy the transcendental principle in (1) are contingent in that respect, as explained above; and it is a mistake to think that Kant has in mind, whether implicitly or not, the overreaching dogmatic if “natural” yearning of reason to demonstrate “why it is these laws, rather than others, which necessarily exist” (Meillassoux 2008: 107).

6. For the above reasons I take Kant's formal-objective correlationism not to be undermined by Meillassoux's critique, whatever other problems Kant's transcendental idealism might face. But I have implicitly been agreeing that Kant's empirical realism *cum* transcendental idealism can in some sense be understood as “correlationist,” i.e. when this is properly understood as an objective and formal correlationism in the ways that I have been outlining, and when it is thus seen to be related to the properly empirical level and to contingency in very different ways than Meillassoux's pictures of Kant suggest. Hereafter let “correlationism” refer to any objective Kantian empirical realism understood as I have delineated it here. What then? What sort of *realism* is a correlational “empirical realism” so understood? Is it in conflict, for example, with *scientific realism*, and in particular with the strong variety of scientific realism defended by Sellars?

It might well seem to be. After all, as everyone knows, Sellars consciously appropriated Kant's transcendental idealism in order to articulate his distinction between the ontology of the “appearances” in the “manifest image,” which stands in ostensible but resolvable conflict with the

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<sup>5</sup> For a brief summary of Meillassoux's argument against the “frequentalist implication” concerning the set of thinkable possibilities as a whole, which he takes to underlie Kant's “necessitarian inference,” see Gratton and Ennis 2015: 169–70.

successor or replacement ontology of the “scientific image,” which according to Sellars gradually reveals to us the real nature of “things in themselves” (Sellars 1962 and 1968, *passim*). Furthermore, in *After Finitude*, Meillassoux’s own argument leads the reader through and beyond his extended critique of Kantian correlationism to the radically non-correlationist, Cartesian rationalist scientific realism of his own *speculative materialism*, which for him is based on an “intellectual intuition” grounded in pure mathematics. I will not pursue Meillassoux’s own positive program here, since the speculative turn as developed by Meillassoux himself is arguably “dogmatic” in Kant’s sense (at least on my reading of the significance of Kant’s work) and is thus epistemically suspect from the perspective of any defender of an objective correlationism.<sup>6</sup> In what remains I will briefly suggest, however, that Sellars was both a Kantian objective correlationist to the end and a thoroughgoing scientific realist, though in my view the most fruitful development of this outlook requires rejecting certain aspects of Sellars’ own view.

7. Elsewhere I have argued that, all things considered, Sellars’ philosophy is most accurately interpreted as a *Kantian naturalism* that attempts to combine two *prima facie* conflicting lines of thought into one conceptually coherent outlook on reality.<sup>7</sup> One is Sellars’ commitment to an all-comprehensive scientific naturalism, to be discussed further below. The other is the Kantian objective-correlationist idea (to continue using Meillassoux’s term, but as understood above), expressed in writings by Sellars throughout his career, that there are certain holistic, second-order meta-principles or categorial conditions that philosophical analysis can show must be true of *any* empirically significant language or conceptual framework that is to succeed in being *about* the world in which it used. To mention one among many other examples – here in relation to his interpretation of Kant’s views – Sellars describes an updated Kantian “transcendental linguistics” as attempting “to delineate the general features that would be common to the epistemic functioning of any language in any possible world,” parallel to the way in which Kant’s

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<sup>6</sup> Since “correlationism” is used in multiple different ways, I hesitate to call myself or to call Sellars (or even Kant himself) a “defender of correlationism” – but here I am doing so in the case of both Kant and Sellars, if Kant’s correlationism is understood as I have described it in the preceding sections. Given how I am understanding the term, there might not be any real disagreement on this particular matter between my view and certain others in this volume, such as Westphal or Christias, given the aspects of “correlationism” that they are criticizing for the purposes of their arguments. Westphal, for example (and cf. Westphal 2004), generally agrees with the sorts of Kantian transcendental arguments that I have been appealing to here, which he sees as consistent with the rejection of Kant’s own transcendental idealism (on Westphal’s reading of that position) and thus also as consistent with a pragmatic and scientific realism. The Kantian naturalist version of empirical realism that will emerge from my discussion of Kant and Sellars here, I take it, is not far off Westphal’s realism in the end, though in the way I have framed matters I remain, as I think Sellars does, too, a “formal, objective correlationist” in Kant’s sense.

Similarly, I find myself largely in agreement with Dionysis Christias’s work on Sellars and Meillassoux (in this volume, and cf. Christias 2016), although for his purposes he, like most others in this volume, quite reasonably frames his argument in such a way that Sellars, but not Meillassoux himself, succeeds in *overcoming* correlationism (i.e., *subjective* correlationism, as distinguished earlier). Similarly in relation to Sachs 2016 and in this volume, I find myself for the most part agreeing regarding the complex relationships between the normative and the non-normative dimensions of experience in Sellars’ work.

<sup>7</sup> Here I will briefly lay out the relevant views of Sellars bluntly and summarily, having provided the detailed textual and interpretive support elsewhere, for example, in O’Shea 2007, 2011, 2016. Sellars’ primary appropriations of Kant are to be found in his 1968 and in the writings collected in Sellars 2002, as well as many other papers during the last two decades of his life. My present purpose, however, is to reflect on the connections between Sellars’ Kantian correlationism and his scientific realism in general, as a contrast to Meillassoux’s outlook as discussed above.

transcendental philosophy sought to establish “the general features any conceptual system must have in order to generate knowledge of a world to which it belongs.”<sup>8</sup>

The relevant principles concern various norm-governed uniformities that reflect a given framework’s implicit, socially maintained linguistic “ought-to-be” rules. These include, for example, conceptual-linguistic norms that instantiate general perceptual reliability principles: for example, that other things being equal, within any given framework, specific types of objects ought to elicit specific types of conceptual/linguistic responses in “normal” circumstances. Or again, Sellars argues, any language that can serve as a cognitive instrument and succeed in representing a world will include instantiations of causal principles that *ceteris paribus* warrant material-inferential connections between different assertions embodying different empirical contents. Of course, the particular material-inference principles are always defeasible for Sellars (as in fact for Kant, too, but more radically so for Sellars), but the transcendental or correlational requirement that, for any framework, there must *be* such material-inferential warrants, if any empirical knowledge is to be possible at all, is as true for Sellars as it was for Kant. Finally, at the highest, i.e. most abstractly formulated level, for Sellars following Kant, such principles reflect various formal-correlational truths concerning a conceptually necessary interdependence between the possibility of any potentially self-aware cognitions at all, and the objective validity of the above sorts of meta-principles in general (cf. Sellars 2002: Chapters 3 and 5). On this view radical scepticism was held by Sellars from his earliest studies at Oxford to the end of his career to be a non-starter that is based from the start on a mistaken conceptual analysis of the form of our experience in general (cf. O’Shea 2016: 3–6). In sum:

Thus, if logical and (more broadly) epistemic categories express general features of the *ought-to-bes* (and corresponding uniformities) which are necessary to the functioning of language as a cognitive instrument, epistemology, in this context, becomes the theory of this functioning – in short *transcendental linguistics*. (Sellars 2002: 302, §40)

My view is that Sellars was committed to the above sorts of Kantian formal-objective correlationist principles not only in relation to his conception of the “manifest image,” which as we know he frames as a Kantian world of “appearances” that is ultimately, at least with regard to its *object* ontology (if not, in crucial respects, with regard to its defensible Kantian view of *persons*, norms, and meanings: cf. O’Shea 2016: 134–7), to be successively reconceived and replaced by the explanatorily superior object-ontology of self-correcting scientific inquiry, which reveals the true nature of things in themselves (and thus also the true nature of the “appearances” of the predecessor frameworks, including the objects of the “common sense framework” or manifest image). Sellars regards such Kantian principles as necessarily characterizing *any* materially contentful conceptual framework that succeeds in representing a mind-independent material world at all, including those frameworks generated by scientific theorizing.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Sellars 2002: 298, 302 [= KTE §§29, 40–1], as well as the further references to Sellars’ various statements endorsing this view of Kant’s across his career that I have documented in O’Shea 2007: 132–5; 2011 *passim*; and 2016: 3–8, 134–146.

<sup>9</sup> For a criticism of my reading of Sellars as defending Kantian constitutive principles of knowledge and self-consciousness even with respect to the Peircean ideal image of persons-in-the-world, see Rottschaefer 2011 (and cf. my response in O’Shea 2011). I have no doubt been influenced in my reading of Sellars by the works of his student and my teacher, Jay F. Rosenberg. See Rosenberg’s own Sellarsian defense of a Kantian “core realism” in *One World and Our Knowledge of It* (1980) and in *The Thinking Self* (1986), and how this generates an “empirical epistemics” in scientific theory-succession that I take to be governed by normative meta-principles of the sort I have been briefly describing above, though of course involving

It might be thought that Sellars' well-known conception of a non-normative, isomorphic *picturing* or correspondence relation that obtains between scientific-theoretical representations on the one hand and the "pure processes" that are thereby represented on the other, shows that the sorts of normative Kantian principles I have been referring to do not (or would not) characterize the ideal scientific image conception of the nature of things in the "Peircean long run," according to Sellars. But that reading would misunderstand the ways in which even the most groundlevel matter-of-factual representational or picturing relations in Sellars are constituted by "semantic uniformities" of response, inference, and action that are themselves generated, governed, maintained, and creatively revised by implicit as well as reflectively evaluated "semantic rules" or normative-linguistic ought-to-be's (cf. Sellars 1968: chapters 3–5).

In fact, it is arguably *the* most distinctive claim of both philosophers (Kant on "blindness" of "intuitions without concepts," and Sellars on "the myth of the given") that the only ultimately coherent account of the crucial contributions of the *nonconceptual* or naturalistic dimensions of human cognition, whether in its sensory aspects or in the most speculative advances of mathematical physics, requires a revolutionary understanding of how conceptual norms and contents are already necessarily involved (of course *defeasibly*, at the empirical level) in determining the ways in which those nonconceptual aspects of our representations can succeed in representing any real object or process in the first place. Furthermore, such necessarily mutually conditioning interrelationships between the normative and natural, the conceptual and nonconceptual, meaning and 'picturing', for Sellars, characterize *any* empirically significant conceptual framework, whether it be the manifest image or a given scientific-theoretical framework, and including our regulative conception of the Peircean ideal scientific image of the world. A proper understanding of Sellars' account of conceptual change in the advancement of science itself relies upon the formal truth, at the meta-conceptual or "transcendental" level, of a Kantian, objectively realist correlationism of the sort sketched above (cf. O'Shea 2007: 147–63).

8. But surely the picture of Kant and Sellars presented in this chapter must in some fundamental respect have misrepresented the views of one or the other thinker, or both, since the formal correlationism of *Kant's* empirical realism is restricted to, and valid only for, the domain of "appearances" in space and time (the model for Sellars' manifest image), and does *not* characterize our thought of "things as they are in themselves"; whereas I have presented Kant's correlationist empirical realism as if it were, on Sellars' view, constitutive of both the manifest and scientific images of "man-in-the-world" (Sellars 1962)?

With respect to Kant, it is true that I must place myself among those interpreters who, all things considered, see Kant as putting forward his empirical realism (and hence his correlative "formal idealism") as, so to speak, *real* realism – that is, as the only intelligible realism, and the only intelligible "metaphysics," of which sense can be made – rather than seeing the domain of appearances (the physical universe) as being, for Kant, a second-class domain that represents for us an inevitable barrier to our grasping the supposedly *really real* domain of so-called "things in themselves." I cannot, of course, enter that perennial interpretive debate about Kant here (cf. O'Shea 2012), and in the end that question is not crucial in relation to what I think is importantly true about Sellars' Kantian naturalism. For I think Sellars as sketched above basically has the right account of the nature of Kant's formally correlationist *empirical realism*. My concerns pertain rather

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sharp differences from Kant (and in the direction of Peirce) on the matter of critically controlled *conceptual change* in science (see below).

to Sellars' own account of the object-ontology of "the common sense framework," i.e. the manifest image conception of perceptible, colored physical objects, as being, in *Sellars'* sense (but not Kant's, I believe), "*transcendentally ideal*, i.e. that there *really are no such things as the objects of which it speaks*" (Sellars 1968: Chapter 5, §95; italics added). I will close with a few remarks on what I mean by these last claims (cf. O'Shea 2016, Ch. 7).

9. As just noted, Sellars' own way of adapting Kant's "transcendental idealist" thesis is to take it as asserting that the persisting, colored objects of the manifest image are intentional objects or "representables" that do not exist *per se*, as he puts it, though they have a represented lawful *actuality* and objectivity in Kant's senses. They are in the end for Sellars "mere appearances," though Sellars argues that we can and should substitute for Kant's basically theological conception of unknowable "things in themselves" the theoretical posits of the ongoing scientific image, in accordance with Sellars' scientific realism and his account of conceptual change as noted earlier. I have criticized in detail elsewhere key aspects of Sellars' substitute for Kant's transcendental idealism, including its key idea that scientific realism entails the *falsity* of the object-ontology of the manifest image, in the nuanced way that Sellars understands that radical claim (cf. O'Shea 2016, chapter 7). So here I will be brief by way of tying together the matters discussed in this chapter.<sup>10</sup>

In *Science and Metaphysics* (1968), chapter two, Sellars argued, *inter alia*, that Kant's *own* arguments for transcendental idealism are unsound, and that the only successful argument for that thesis (again, interpreted by Sellars as asserting the ultimate falsity of the object-ontology of the manifest image) derives from Sellars' own famous (or infamous?) views concerning the ultimately real ontological home of "expanses of colour" and other sensible qualities: namely, as analogically conceived "non-physical<sub>2</sub>" basic constituents of central nervous systems, to be discovered by a future neuroscientific theory of consciousness.<sup>11</sup> To cut to the chase, there are two very different sorts of argument, in two different domains, that Sellars primarily relies upon to draw in this way his own radical (and non-Kantian) "transcendental idealist" conclusion. I shall describe these regions of complex argument in Sellars crudely here, along with my reservations about them:

(A) The first cluster of arguments concern, for example, Sellars' contention that the "ultimate homogeneity" of sensible (e.g., colour) qualities (allegedly) requires their wholesale ontological "relocation" (Rosenthal 2016) to the perceiver in such a way that ultimately entails the falsity of the manifest image's ordinary object-ontology of persisting, coloured physical objects.

But many philosophers, myself included, who are otherwise strongly influenced by Sellars' philosophy would contend that in this particular region of his thought Sellars ultimately relies upon doubtful and widely contested assumptions about sensory consciousness, assumptions that have

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<sup>10</sup> For an in depth and insightful treatment of these aspects of Sellars' appropriation of Kant, see Haag 2016.

<sup>11</sup> For a start, cf. Sellars 1956 part XVI, 1962 parts V–VI, 1968 chapters 1, 5, 6, for example. For my analysis of Sellars' views on "sensa," cf. O'Shea 2007, chapter 6. For Sellars, something is *physical<sub>1</sub>* if it belongs in the space-time-causal network (this is the wider, all-inclusive notion), and *physical<sub>2</sub>* if it is definable in terms of theoretical primitives adequate to describe the universe prior to the appearance of life. So for Sellars, "sensa" such as expanses of colour, i.e. processes involving qualitative sensory consciousness in what corresponds, at the microlevel, to the central nervous system), are *physical<sub>1</sub>-but-not-physical<sub>2</sub>*. Put most starkly: the basic primitives of physics will in future have to be radically reconceived in order to handle qualitative sensory consciousness, on Sellars' view.

been exposed as non-compulsory in debates in the philosophy of mind about “qualia” over the last several decades.<sup>12</sup>

(B) The second point concerns Sellars’ apparent assumption that the Feyerabend/Kuhn style *ontological replacement* models of scientific development in theoretical physics that Sellars developed independently in his own account of radical conceptual change and scientific explanation, will neatly generalize to all the so-called “special sciences” such as biology as well, thus giving him confidence that *all* the objects of the manifest image and of the special sciences will, in principle, be reducible to successor-theory replacement ontologies in the way that is at least arguably suggested by Sellars’ various accounts of the kinetic theory of gases, of relativity theory in relation to Newtonian physics, and so on.

But on what basis does Sellars thus assume that this sweeping generalization and projection about the future course of the natural sciences holds across *all* such object-domains, such that, in the end, only the objects or rather “absolute processes” of a future microphysics *really exist* in the end? Here too debates over the last several decades concerning the ontological status of the objects of the “special sciences” such as biology arguably suggest otherwise.

I do not intend to enter into the ongoing debates about (A) and (B) here. I have mentioned these considerations only to motivate, however briefly, my own view that Sellars in the end offers no compelling reason to follow him in embracing the radical thesis that *he* calls “transcendental idealism”: that is, the thesis that the ordinary objects of the manifest image strictly speaking do not exist per se, though of course on his view their scientific successors in a future ideal physics *do* really exist, as what correspond for Sellars to Kant’s theologically conceived “things in themselves.” I think it is crucial to recognize, however, that as I argued earlier Sellars *does* embrace the objective, formal correlationism of Kant’s *empirical realism* throughout his thinking, across both the manifest and scientific images, as holding true of *any* empirically significant conceptual framework. And in light of that fact, I suggest that once we have rejected (A) and (B) above it should strike us now that the following closely related positions, (A\*) and (B\*), reflect what are the really important insights of Sellars in these two domains, but now without Sellars’ arguably implausible version of “transcendental idealism”. That is:

(A\*) We can fully embrace Sellars’ ingenious mid-twentieth century attempt to make room for robust *theories* of *nonconceptual sensory representation* (against the apparent recommendations of such so-called “left wing” Sellarsian philosophers as Richard Rorty, Robert Brandom, and John McDowell) *within* what is nevertheless a robustly Kantian-correlational empirically realist framework (of the sorts defended, for example, by Brandom and McDowell). What we need to reject in this domain are only the two doubtful assumptions referred to in (A) and (B).<sup>13</sup>

(B\*) Fully consistently with Sellars’ objective Kantian correlationism – but rejecting the contentions in (A) – we can defend a robust and self-correcting *scientific realist* outlook on the reality of theoretical entities (as Kant himself arguably did, e.g., in the Appendix to the *Dialectic*), as involving radical conceptual change in whatever domains this turns out to be

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<sup>12</sup> For a summary of these issues as pertains to Sellars and his Sellarsian critics, cf. O’Shea 2016. For an in depth yet sympathetic criticism of this “relocation” aspect of Sellars’ view, see Rosenthal 2016 in particular.

<sup>13</sup> For progress on this front by Sellars-inspired philosophers, see for example Coates 2007; Landy 2015; Rosenberg 1986, chapters 4–6; Rosenthal 2016; Sachs 2014; and Westphal 2004. For a detailed naturalistic defense of Sellars’ own views about sensory consciousness informed by recent scientific developments in dynamical systems theory, see Seibt 2016.

explanatorily successful *a posteriori*; but *without* this scientific realism allegedly entailing merely *a priori* or “transcendentally” the fully generalized ultimate falsity of “the common sense framework,” i.e., the basic manifest image object-ontology.

The resulting Kantian naturalist outlook would be “objectively correlationist” throughout, and *with* Sellars we would hold that there is nothing about such a conceptually correlationist *empirical realism* that entails a *subjectively* correlationist version of transcendental idealism in the ways that I have argued pertain to Meillassoux’s interpretation of Kantian correlationism. But *against* Sellars, we would be rejecting (A) and (B) in favor of pursuing the closely related but more plausible (A\*) and (B\*).

Overall, put polemically, if this Kantian naturalist empirical realism and scientific realism is charged with being a form of “anti-realism,” the response should be that it is only “anti-” the sorts of epistemically unhinged Realisms that flout the sorts of generically abstract, objectively correlationist conceptual conditions that continue to be fruitfully articulated in a wide variety of updated variations on Kantian themes, of which Sellars’ own Kantian naturalist philosophy continues to be one of the most compelling examples.

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